

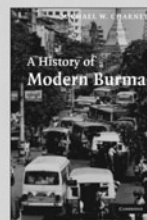
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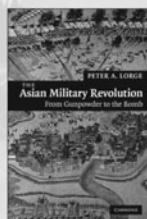


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Articles appearing in the Journal of Southeast Asian Studies are abstracted or indexed in *America: History and Life*; *Biography Index*; *Humanities Index*; *Historical Abstracts*, *Part A: Modern History Abstracts*; *Historical Abstracts*, *Part B: Twentieth Century Abstracts*; *Recently Published Articles* (American Historical Association); *ABC POL SCI*; *Petroleum Abstracts*; *Geographical Abstracts*; *Human Geography*; *International Development Abstracts*; *International Political Science Abstracts*; *Index of Islamic Literature*.

Cover images: *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (2009 – Volume 40)

Kneeling Figure with an Offering Vessel

Stoneware, Le Dynasty, 15th century, possibly Cu Lao Cham, Quang Nam Province, Vietnam
H 22.7cm, W 18.5cm, D17cm
Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore
Gift of Joe Grimberg and Rosalind Shellim in memory of Aaron Brooke David

Kneeling figures were part of the wide repertoire of Vietnamese blue-and-white ceramics that were made in northern Vietnam for export during the 15th century. This rare example is thought to have been made for the Javanese market. His grotesque features, skirtwrap or *kain panjang* and ceremonial knife or *keris* tucked in at the waist, point to a Javanese source of inspiration. The figure recalls the Punakawan or clown court servants found in the Javanese theatre tradition. Their crude behaviour is underscored by words of wisdom for which they are highly revered.

Vietnamese potters were the only Southeast Asians to produce blue-and-white ceramics, as they had access to the cobalt pigment which may have been sourced from west Asia and China, as well as the technology to produce high-fired ceramics. They were also quick to seize the opportunity that arose when early Ming emperors banned the export of ceramics from China. Overseas demand was high and large quantities were produced for export, particularly to Southeast Asia. For example, the cargo that was excavated from Cu Lao Cham off the coast of Hoi An in central Vietnam in the late 1990s, comprised around 250,000 pieces. The high quality and unusual designs on the wares indicate that the clientele were discerning in their tastes and likely included the east Javanese court.

[This description was contributed by Heidi Tan, Senior Curator, Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore]

Standing Kedah Buddha

Bronze, 5th–9th centuries, Kedah, Malay peninsula
H 20.6cm, A0134

Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore

The bottom panel displays a highly significant artefact affectionately known as the 'Kedah Buddha', after the north-western province of Malaysia where it was excavated. This bronze figure is thought to be one of the earliest images of Buddha to be found in the region.

It can be dated between the 5th and the 9th centuries of the Common Era, partly on the basis of Indian art styles of the Gupta period (4th–6th centuries). Indian images probably provided prototypes for Southeast Asian workshops. This figure was excavated from a site in the Bujang Valley or Lembah Bujang, (Malay for 'Dragon Valley'), north of Butterworth and home to a large complex of ancient brick structures built along several river networks. The valley was one of the earliest Hindu Buddhist settlements in the region, dating to the 4th century and later became an important trading centre within the powerful maritime kingdom of Sri Vijaya.

The workmanship, which is less refined than Indian examples of this period, suggests it was unlikely to have come from India, but rather from local workshops, where presumably the process of interpreting and adapting new religious imagery or technological skills was still in the early stages. The lost wax method of bronze casting was used, in which the figure would have first been modelled in wax and then covered in a clay mould, before molten bronze was poured in to burn the wax away and assume the form of the figure. Certain attributes suggest that local artists had a keen eye for details. Carefully incised facial features, a series of folds on the back of the tightly clinging robes and the individually modelled hair curls, can easily be overlooked on first glance.

The graceful standing posture described by art historians as *tribhanga* (literally 'three bends' in Sanskrit), in which the hips sway to one side, is well known and one that is associated with early Buddhist images. The gesture of the extended right arm with palm open to the viewer, known as *varada mudra* ('boon-bestowing gesture'), signifies charity and the bestowal of favours. These attributes assume greater significance, when we consider the context in which it may have been used. The transmission of Buddhism from India to Southeast Asia during the early centuries may have been aided by the use of small portable icons, extolling the benefits of the faith. New ideas, like commodities, travelled along the trade routes used by merchants and took root in coastal trading centres. Dorothy and H. G. Quaritch Wales excavated some 30 sites along the Bujang and other rivers of this area and in the early 1940s, they reported that many of these were temple shrines or *candi*, most probably frequented by travellers on the inland waterways. Amongst the finds that were sent to museums overseas, a small collection of votive offerings in the form of miniature gold objects and clay votive tablets as well as this bronze figure were deposited at the Raffles Museum in Singapore. Today, the Kedah Buddha can be viewed at the Asian Civilisations Museum, which generously gave permission for the image to be published.

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